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# The Modernization of Resistance Latin American Women since 1500

**MELANIE BYAM**

Melanie is a senior at Bridgewater State College and wrote this paper for Dr. Erin O'Connor's course on Latin American Women and Gender. Melanie is currently writing her thesis on a similar topic and applying to graduate school to continue exploring her passion for all things Latin American.

While the term feminist may be fairly new, the idea that women must resist their environment is an historic battle. In Latin America, gender has remained a key element in life since the pre-colonial era. From the destruction of complementarity to its revival in the twentieth century, the upward struggle against patriarchy has existed. Patriarchy is an ever-evolving entity, so the methods used to resist it must also be ever-evolving. While today, we see a conscious effort on the part of men and women to eliminate its presence, its malleable past gives it the image of immortality. Throughout history, Latin American women have used any means necessary to resist patriarchy in any form. They have both embraced and rejected social norms, as well as fought side by side with men, but patriarchy has not been defeated because of its ability to adapt.

Beginning in the late fifteenth century, European nations began colonizing Latin America. By instilling a strong patriarchy over the inhabitants of the nation, and manipulating gender roles, the European *conquistadors* formed a central government that was not defeated for over three hundred years. Women found many ways to resist this patriarchy including maintaining indigenous culture, witchcraft, and religion. By the sixteenth century, the formation of a Spanish colony in Peru had destroyed Andean complementarity and culture in an attempt to “civilize” Peru to fit European values. Irene Silverblatt presents a clear and precise view of how resistance formed out of this forced acculturation. An early Spanish colonial, Noboa, on a quest to “root out pagan and idolatrous traditions,”<sup>1</sup> brought charges against a women’s religious cult as witches. Women, in order to fight this onslaught of culture, clung to their indigenous ways. Silverblatt offers a choice example of this resistance with the women of the Puna. As the Spanish rose to patriarchal power, certain indigenous men were permitted to rise in the political ranks. Indigenous women, however, were marginalized and therefore fell under the radar. A good number of women, some who had not yet been converted to Christianity, fled to the mountains, or Puna region, of Peru, to resist European culture and “attempt to re-create the ‘female component’ of Andean lifeways, as well as the social relations and ideology which governed their [ancestor’s world].”<sup>2</sup> The Puna allowed women to resist Spanish culture by maintaining their own. This was an especially useful method of resistance, and women came to represent indigenous culture. Since they were not given the

1. Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun and Witches* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 32.

2. Silverblatt, 209.

chance to rise politically, it was easier for them to maintain their ancient culture. This method did not fall on deaf ears as it was revived in the indigenous movements of the twentieth century.

To remain in the colonial period, however, Silverblatt opens up one other very important form of resistance, witchcraft. Women manipulated the fear that accompanied witchcraft to empower themselves. Witchcraft often fell under unintentional resistance, but was resistance all the same. In an attempt to “Christianize” Peru, women’s customs of healing were seen by colonials as witchcraft. These convictions, however, became an indirect gift of power. Men, especially Spanish men, feared the unknown source of women’s power to heal, and inadvertently allowed them to make powerful social commentary. One example that Silverblatt offers is the image of “[t]he devil as a Spaniard.”<sup>3</sup> Women, when portraying these “images” they had seen, portrayed the devil as a Spaniard, thus, making powerful social commentary without retribution. In backlash of their patriarchy over cultures, the Spanish fear of the unknown gave women the prerogative to resist the colonists and their religious views.

Women of African descent also used religion to make powerful social commentary in the colonial period. Ursula de Jesus was a religious servant, a position very low on the church’s totem-pole, placed there for being both poor and non-white. Ursula, unlike the indigenous women of Peru, embraced the religious beliefs of the church to resist the patriarchy that had oppressed those in her position. Ursula claimed that spirits of loved ones passed on came to her in visions giving her messages of reprove toward those in power. Since she was truly believed to have the power of vision, she was able to use these “visions” to move her way up in the hierarchy and resist the current patriarchy, until she was in a very high position considering her race and class, a *donada*. By interceding “on behalf of troubled souls [...] she served as a source of moral authority and as a disciplinary measure,”<sup>4</sup> used the European faith to reprimand those with more power, and found ways to punch holes in the patriarchy of the church.

Ursula de Jesus was not the only colonial-era religious woman to use the convent as a means of resistance. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, used the church to pursue her goals of a masculine education. Sor Juana manipulated the social values of the time by becoming a nun, and rejecting the only other honorable choice, marriage, and its inherent patriarchy. Entering the convent allowed women to remain respectable, but also to attain a certain sense of freedom. However, in the case of Sor Juana, she pushed the envelope too far. Hers was “a life of struggle toward salvation in a world of

troubling contradictions,”<sup>5</sup> despite the fact that she was perhaps one of the most brilliant minds in history. A child prodigy, she entered the convent to continue her studies without the shackles of husband or child. She was resisting against the patriarchy that loomed over her in marriage and attempted to manipulate those same values to reach her goals. Not only did she seek to learn, but sought to get recognition for her knowledge. It is perhaps the latter that sent her dreams a step too far out of reach. At the age of fifteen for example, she was invited to a conference in Mexico in which men challenged her with equations of mathematics which she easily solved. The problem this presents is that she wished to gain acknowledgement for her education. She wished to be like, “the Queen of Sheba, so learned she dares to test the wisdom of the wisest of all men.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Queen of Sheba, however, she must come up against patriarchy of the church and state. The church wishes to limit her learning to the study of God, while the state wishes for “respectable women ‘to remain at a distance from the mundane affairs of the public and stay shut up in their houses.’”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is the duality of the patriarchy that caused her resistance to fail, and in the end, her passion for learning was indeed quelled.

While most forms of resistance mentioned have been on the subtle side, historians start to explore stronger, blatant forms of resistance nearing the end of the colonial period. As countries near the stage of revolution, women begin to take the forefront and play important roles. Micaela Bastida Puyucagua resists both the patriarchy of colonialism and the patriarchy of the home. She fought side by side with her husband Jose Gabriel Tupac Amaru in a Peruvian Indian revolt in 1780. “During this struggle, [...] Amaru’s chief aid and advisor remained his wife, Micaela Bastidas Puyucagua.”<sup>8</sup> Not only did she stand up to the system, militantly, but she stood up to the patriarchy that exists in her own life as well. In her letter to her husband she says about his lack of progress, “You made me a promise, but from now on I shall not place any faith in your promises.”<sup>9</sup> She stands up strong against a husband, which could prove to be dangerous during those times. Micaela uses warfare and rejection of social values to resist patriarchy of state and home. In a sense, Micaela’s story is also an example of maintaining one’s culture as a form of resistance. Tupac Amaru’s

3. Silverblatt, 182.

4. Nancy E. Van Deusen, “Ursula de Jesus; A Seventeenth-Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic,” In Kenneth J. Andrien, eds. *The Human Tradition in Colonial Latin America*. (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2002), 97.

5. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz “Letter to Sor Filotea” in *Colonial Latin America* Chapter 6 (1691): 207.

6. Ines de la Cruz, 213.

7. Ines de la Cruz, 207.

8 Micaela Bastidas Puyucagua, “Indian Revolt in Peru,” in June E. Hahner, eds. *Women in Latin American History: Their Lives and Views* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1980), 35.

9. Bastidas Puyucagua, 37.

claim to revolt was that Peru might return to the mighty Incan culture, and one vital part of this culture was complementarity. He could not have been a king without a queen, a *coya*, and he and his wife resisted patriarchy of state by maintaining the complementarity of their Incan culture.

During the period of Independence and Progress, roughly the nineteenth century, women were forced to find alternative methods of resistance as the patriarchy they faced was now that of their own countrymen, rather than those of foreign invaders. Now, women had to adapt their resistance to resemble support of state and home. While under European rule, the ultimate patriarchy was that of elite whites over the poor indigenous peoples, whereas in the nineteenth century we see a reformation of patriarchy centered in the home, simply with men over women and children. While many believed that their problems would be solved by independence, the problems of women remained. Most women who were considered feminists of the time did not advocate for major changes, but usually for the education of women. The problem with this notion is that the state also advocated for education of women, but for the betterment of the state. More intelligent women made better mothers, who mothered better citizens. By giving women a proper nationalistic education, they were sure to raise proper patriotic sons which could only benefit the state.

One feminist who took this agonizingly slow approach to reform was Teresa Gonzalez de Fanning. She pleads for the education of women, but for the benefit of the state, in her "Concerning the Education of Women." She later set up a school to teach these ideas which became very popular with liberal elites. She declares that, "The soul of a child is a blank book, where it is up to the father and more especially to the mother to write the first few pages."<sup>10</sup> She even goes so far as to say that the uneducated women of Peru were at fault for the defeat at the War of the Pacific. Gonzalez was part of a train of feminists in the nineteenth century who "resisted" by preaching pacifist education as opposed to rights and policies. As she says, "It is [the mother] who must shape the men of tomorrow, the future citizens."<sup>11</sup> She does not ask that women become citizens by name, but that they educate themselves to make their sons better citizens. Feminists like Gonzales de Fanning were so limited in their push for resistance because it was inherent that women were not citizens. The patriarchy created by independence was perhaps stronger than it had been under colonialism because of the masculinity involved in independence, and the sense of power felt by these formally emasculated men.

10. Teresa Gonzalez de Fanning, "Concerning the Education of Women," in *Women in Latin American History* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1980) 34.

11. Gonzalez de Fanning, 34.

Another famous Latin American Progressive era feminist is Clorinda Matto de Turner. In Matto de Turner's novel *Torn from the Nest*, she argues for the betterment of both women and indigenous people. First published in 1889, the story depicts the struggles between the landed elite, wealthy city folks, and indigenous peoples. Matto starts with a plea for the poor. The family of Juan Yupanqui, pawns in a grand scheme of landed elite to extort funds from the poor, pleads for assistance from the wealthy Don Fernando and his wife Lucia. In the novel, government officials leave large, unwanted loans with poor families and one year later collect on the loan with high interest. Lucia is a "generous hand that offers help in supreme distress,"<sup>12</sup> and is able to help the Yupanqui's with this breach of justice. Throughout the novel, the cruelties of the rural government are revealed in a creative fashion, portraying cruelties of both church and state. Matto's resistance and plea for the poor is more pronounced because many of the Independence government officials came from poor backgrounds. Her stance on feminism, however, must be more subtle.

Lucia is a very educated woman. She can sew, and stitch, and read as well. While she is also naïve, she is sure to raise proper citizens. Because of these things, she is happily married, well occupied and able to help her community members. When Lucia and Fernando adopt Yupanqui's oldest daughter Margarita, Marcela Yupanqui hopes that, "[her daughter will] learn to sew and do that pretty embroidery they say Senora Lucia knows how to do."<sup>13</sup> The message given is that learning to make yourself a better wife will allow you to lead a happy, productive life. The methods of Progressive resistance do not change much over time because of a fear of officials that people will revolt again. In Matto's forum, limited by the patriarchal government, she must preach women's rights in small doses.

There were some feminists of the time, however, who used education as a tool to gain rights. Francisca Senhorinha da Motta Diniz spoke of education as a form of resistance. She did not believe that women were utilizing all of the rites they already had because they were uneducated. She believed that "Women's emancipation through education is the bright torch which can dispel the darkness [...] and bring us to a civilized society."<sup>14</sup> She asked women to use all of their assets, "their moral beauty and the force of their intellects,"<sup>15</sup> to boldly demand political rights such as the right to vote and to be elected to office. She was asking

12. Clorinda Matto de Turner, *Torn from the Nest* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1998).

13. Matto de Turner, 48.

14. Francisca Senhorinha da Motta Diniz, "What Do We Want?" in June E. Hahner, eds., *Women in Latin American History—their lives and views*. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1980) 54.

15. Senhorinha da Motta Diniz, 54.

for equality, something that most feminists of the time fell short of. Senhorinha was resisting the popularity of falling in with the trend that many women did: find a good husband, be a good wife. She was, instead, begging women to resist that temptation, the easier road, for one more educated and defined.

During the first half of the twentieth century, progress under the independence regimes appeared to have failed, and countries underwent revolutions against these governments. During the Mexican Revolution, women stood in the resistance of this independence patriarchy, and many played important roles as camp followers and even soldiers. In the famous case of the *soldaderas*, women fought as soldiers in the Mexican revolution.<sup>16</sup> However, just as is the case with independence regimes, so was the failure of most revolutionary regimes, and soon after revolutionary victory, the memory of these women was soon lost. Mary Kay Vaughan does not consider the revolutionary regime of Mexico one free of patriarchy, but rather a new patriarchy, a modernized patriarchy. Admitting that women were so vital to victory would put into question the claim to patriarchy that government officials held. Women of the post-revolutionary regime now faced not only patriarchy, but the modernization of that idea which “retained, perhaps even strengthened the patriarchy.”<sup>17</sup> Women had to once again adapt their methods of resistance toward this new type of patriarchy. Like the Progressive Era, revolutionary governments granted women education but “to subordinate the household to the interests of national development.”<sup>18</sup> Revolutionary leaders fell short of their goals, and military leaders, such as those of the *Zapatos*, were perhaps as cruel and harmful to the poor, nonwhite Mexicans as the previous leaders had been, because the true beneficiaries of the “Justice, land and water,”<sup>19</sup> were elite, white men. Women were unable to adapt to this new patriarchy, in a strong sense of resistance, until the 1950s.

One of the first powerful speakers for women and the poor was Carolina Maria de Jesus. In the 1950’s, she recorded her daily comings and goings in the world of the *favelas* of Brazil. Some readers consider the repetitiveness of the novel too much, but it is important to her story that she reiterates day after day that she “went to collect paper... cooked... went to collect more paper.”<sup>20</sup> Moment after hopeless moment the empty void of her life drags

on. She lives only to support her children. In her brave story, she attacks both the men of the world and patriarchy. First, she rejects the patriarchy of marriage by remaining unmarried, and reveals that most men, defeated by the thought of their own poverty, cling to their wives for survival. She also rejects the patriarchy of state through the claims of her story. She exclaims, “In our country, everything is weak. Democracy is weak and the politicians are very weak.”<sup>21</sup> Because she became a mother, she lost her job and in effect her home. Her state, preaching democracy and equality, falls short of those promises when it comes to the poor and the non-white. She tells a tale of the modernization of poverty which becomes synonymous with women. Carolina resists the patriarchy of the government by detailing the depravity that exists in her country and bravely pointing out those responsible.

In the last part of the twentieth century, women were forced to adapt their resistance yet again. Their methods included military force, their label as mother and the return to their roles as protectors of culture. During this period, we see the emergence of leftist groups disguised as feminist supporters. However, after these leftist regimes come to power, we see that women do not fully exercise all of the rights they have gained. On top of that, the promises made to them have not been kept. During these leftist revolutions, women played important roles as soldiers, spies and even army generals. They rejected the patriarchy of their former government to practice the rights provided by their political ties, and fight side by side with men. Women, even after being given these rights, were still forced to fight patriarchy existing in the army. Men were reluctant to follow the command of a female, and yet again the resistance of women was forced to mutate as they were now forced to fight patriarchy from below: men of lower status who maintained control because of the firm patriarchy in place. To strengthen resistance, women assert their control to prove to men that as leaders they are successful. From her time as a soldier in the Nicaraguan Revolution, Ana Julia, remembers, “It was necessary for [them] to realize that we women had earned our right to participate in the struggle.”<sup>22</sup> Nicaragua, as well as Cuba, was helped greatly by women, and their assistance played an important role in resistance for women’s rights and the rights of the poor. The question remains, however, will these promises be kept and these rights remain?

After the victories of these socialist revolutions, the true realization of equality for women was never truly reached. The unisex military forces were broken up, and according to heads of the nation, “It’s not because women comrades aren’t capable... you might say it’s because of failings on the part of some men, comrades who haven’t had the experience of fighting alongside

16. Class notes, 12/13/06

17. Mary Kay Vaughan, “Modernizing Patriarchy,” in Elizabeth Dore and Maxin Molyneux, eds. *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 194.

18. Vaughan, 194.

19. Martinez, Pedro. “The Revolution,” in *Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (1964): 88, 92-94.

20. Carolina Maria de Jesus, *Child of the Dark* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003).

21. Maria de Jesus, 31.

22. Margaret Randall, “The Women in Olive Green,” in *Sandino’s Daughters*, (Toronto: New Star Books, 1981), 133.



women.”<sup>23</sup> This general claims that men will not be able to overcome their sexism, while during the revolution men and women worked together to attain victory, and with few issues. Women are, of course, certainly given more rights under these regimes, but as we have seen before, these rights were for the betterment of the state. They are, for example, permitted to work, even after marriage, without dishonor. Why the change of heart? Margaret Randall explains that, “In order to conquer underdevelopment, society needs the contributions of all of its members, both men and women.”<sup>24</sup> Women had to work to allow the country to flourish. The failure of these countries to defeat patriarchy is seen in the film *Portrait of Teresa*. Teresa, her husband Ramon, and their two sons, live in communist Cuba and the practice of this equality is juxtaposed to the promise of equality. Teresa is held back from what she truly desires, and allowed to work simply to support the family, because Ramon feels that his role as patriarch is threatened when he is no longer sole bread-winner.

Aside from socialist regimes, other extremist governments came to Latin American power, including the military *Proceso* in Argentina, infamous for the disappearance of any government nay-sayers. One important group that emerged in resistance was *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, also known as the Mothers of the Disappeared. Marysa Navarro depicts the heroic rise of this all female organization from a small group of mothers to an international powerhouse in “The Personal is Political.”

The group joined other human rights organization in their efforts to publicize the plight of the disappeared in Europe and the United states. The Madres established contacts with human rights organizations in other countries, lobbied for support among foreign congressmen, [and] testified wherever they were invited to do so.<sup>25</sup>

Being composed entirely of women, the group could embrace the patriarchal view of motherhood to work toward their main goal: finding their children at any cost. Compared to other militant protestors, the mothers escaped almost unscathed because they tapped into that motherhood revered by society.

The last stance to discuss in the twentieth century evolution of

23. Margaret Randall, “Appendixes”, in *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (New York: Smyrna Press, 1981), 139.

24. Randall, 140.

25. Marysa Navarro, “The Personal is Political: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo,” in Susan Eckstein, ed., *Power and Popular Protest; Latin American Social Movements*, (Berkley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1989).

resistance is the Indigenous Movement. Women and men joined together to redefine and strengthen their culture. To fight the patriarchy of the white elite, these indigenous people joined together for the greatest claim to prosperity, land. “Land has historically been a principal demand of Ecuador’s indigenous movement.”<sup>26</sup> Land, since the dawn of colonialism, has been the ultimate claim to power and independence. In an act of resistance, the indigenous government official Nina Pacari, of Ecuador, has been fighting for this symbol of power since her rise in government. Pacari, like other indigenous women, stands firmly to her indigenous dress and customs as a resistance of the patriarchy that keeps her people oppressed.

While Pacari blatantly speaks out against the government she works for, others have taken more subtle routes. Since the pre-Columbian days women have resisted in any fashion they can create. They have been forced to fight imposing religions and governments, modernization and patriarchy. They have used all of the tools given to them, including the social values they intended to eventually destroy. Through protest and literature, and simple rejection of social codes, women in resistance continue to fight that battle today. The idea of resistance will probably never end because the battles continue to morph. The situation women are in today is not the same as it will be in ten years, so their methods must adapt if they are to progress. Resistance, for women, will never end as long as they are forced to adapt to new situations.

26. “Nina Pacari”, in *Notable Twentieth-Century Latin American Women*, 220.

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